

# *A brief overview of locative prepositions and their role of marker*

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## **Abstract**

Prepositions are typically polysemious items: they have different, but related senses.

According to cognitive semantics, the figurative senses of a preposition are extended from its spatial senses through conceptual metaphors. In a pedagogical context, it may be useful to draw learners' attention to those aspects of a preposition's spatial sense that are especially relevant for its metaphorization processes. This article examines possible ways in which cognitive semantic analyses of prepositions could be used to anticipate comprehension problems, and facilitate comprehension of the unfamiliar figurative senses.

**Key words:** *sign of relation and functional signs, contiguous and detached relations, primary and secondary signs.*

## **Introduction**

Prepositions are a part of speech that is hard to define. For example, most of foreigners who learn English as a foreign language easily fail to distinguish phrases, like: "**In the street**" and "**On the street**". It is difficult to explain why this happens.<sup>1</sup>

There is an interesting thing, foreigners who speak English face difficulties in acquiring prepositions. Based on a conducted survey, it was concluded that 90% of foreigners who learn English, never manage to properly acquire prepositions. Only 10% of foreigners are

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<sup>1</sup> Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language*, Longman, 1985, pp. 659.

successful in their acquisition, while ordinary English native speakers can make any kind of errors, whether syntactic, semantic or morphological, but in no way they will use prepositions incorrectly.<sup>2</sup> It is also interesting to note that children whose mother tongue is English manage to acquire prepositional forms quite late and with difficulty. This learning is accomplished during their preschool age through various games and activities.

Prepositions are distinguished from one another through a mutual combination of Contrastive and semantic markers. Understanding of prepositions consists in semantic complexity of markers which consist of a **relation marker** and **function marker** operating on objects. The markers themselves are concepts relating to the perceptual space viewed and occupied by speakers of a language. As will be shown the function markers extract, as it were, a part of an object as semantically salient. In this regard, speakers of a language must adopt common perceptions of space. Speakers of a language agree about visual components of objects in space. A listener is prepared to choose the right words and prepositions in the immense linguistic areal to respond to interlocutors. Prepositions represent a cultural cognitive contingent with visual perceptions. We have no idea at all how we conceive this, but we can say, what we perceive is a cultural dependence

### *A brief overview of locative prepositions and their role of sign*

Difficulties encountered among foreign learners of English prepositions are divided into two groups:

- a) The first difficulty is the general structure of markers which differs from a language to a language, although the core of such common markers is found in all languages,
- b) The second is a minimal combination of markers that differs prepositions among them in a given language.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Geoffrey Leech, *Students Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Pearson education, Harlow, Essex, 2002, pp.47.

Prepositions are sensitive linguistic elements that are culturally acceptable and very well known to all members of the same linguistic community.

In fact, due to features of prepositions, children of any linguistic community acquire them with delay.<sup>3</sup>

Children, first of all have to acquire semantic cognitive integrity in their own language, respectively, they have to learn marks of the system before they are able to use them. It is obvious that marks are complex; as such children's role is twofold. They have to study content of each mark and then acquire the possibility of their combination. It is still unknown how these two elements are acquired.

This theory proposes a semantic group of markers through which English prepositions as a part of constitutive prepositional phrases encourage speakers to perceive relationships between objects.

However, the difficulty, foreigners face in using correctly English language prepositions compared to other parts of grammar, is more evident because foreigners who speak English, use different semantic signs, even though some of the prepositions in their mother tongues have the same features with the English ones. The greatest difficulty is in the field of semantics and by no ways in the syntax.

Foreigners who deal with English should learn some visual features of prepositions as well as some necessary combinations, some of which are very close to the prepositions of their native languages. However, this similarity often makes their learning more difficult.

For example, we Albanians, while learning English face difficulties in distinguishing

Prepositions '**on**' and '**over**' or '**on**' and '**Above**', e.g., The Albanian phrase "**Ilampa mbi tavoline**" in English will be used in two ways with different meanings, e.g. "**The lamp on the table**" and "**The lamp above the table**". In the phrase, the bottom surface of the lamp is contiguous with the surface of the table, while in the second, the lamp stands above the surface of the table without touching it, whereas the

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<sup>3</sup> Rodney H., and Geoffrey P., *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.130.

Albanian preposition 'mbi' does not distinguish if the lamp's bottom surface is contiguous with the surface of the table or it stands above it.

Albanians find it difficult to distinguish the prepositions 'in' and 'at' in English, since these two concepts in Albanian often result in the preposition 'në' (in).

A serious concern is that the psychology of perception envisages some features of contours which determine form of prepositions. (Gibson, 1950).<sup>4</sup>

A listener fits itself to presentation of objects in conformity of conceptualization expressed through prepositions. This adaptation varies among speakers and is reflected in the interpretation. As a result, some speakers find the meaning of any strange phrase based on the preposition they encounter.

### *Description of the Markers*

The nature of semantic description of prepositions is based on semantic markers, which are a clear symbol referring to their concepts. A semantic marker is a formal symbol standing for a concept. A list of primitive semantic markers is given, together with a description indicating the intended interpretation of the primitives.

The definition of the word is given by specifying complex semantic marker that is a combination of the primary marker. Combining method also has a certain interpretation, so that the complex marker stands for a concept which is composed, in this way indicated from the primitive concept. For example, the marker "human" has as its intended interpretation the property of being human. The marker "young" has as its intended interpretation the property of being at the early part of limited temporal existence. Thus (human) (young) represents a complex concept corresponding to the word "child".<sup>5</sup> The examples given indicate concepts of fixed properties.

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<sup>4</sup> Gibson, J. J. *The Perception of the Visual World*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1950, pp.10.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, Macmillan, New York, 1958, pp.83.

But a concept may also be of a relation with two or more arguments, and these arguments may themselves be concepts as well as other entities (e.g., physical objects or spatial configurations). Thus, the concept of L (location) is a relation of two objects: H (Head) and (RP) Referential Point, and can be symbolized by the semantic marker L (location), H (Head), RP (Referential Point). <sup>6</sup>RP is interpreted as a place of H; it may be a subject or object, even a physical or spatial configuration. RP is a location of H. The difference between location and point of reference is that the location encompasses (but not always) a larger referential point, but reference point is always within the space of location. The combinations of relation markers and functional markers have always different interpretations. For example, L, H and RP are in the permanent connection relationship. Prepositions of place, unlike nouns and adjectives specify relation concepts with two or more arguments.

In general, the meaning of prepositions should be given in terms of relation markers and function markers instead of the sort of marker which specifies a property concept. Locative prepositions specify spatial relationships between a small subset of the characteristics of the objects indicated by the expressions which are connected by the preposition. However, the meaning of prepositions can be analyzed, first, with the concepts of function which pick out relevant characteristics to be related, and the second, with the related concept describing the special relation between the values of the functions. The resulting complex relation marker will thus have the form (H) to head, (RP) to Referential Point, and (R) relationship, (L) location. All these signs connect objects and places.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Geoffrey Leech, *Students Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Pearson education, Harlow, Essex, 2002, pp.102.

<sup>7</sup> Seth Lindstromberg, *English Prepositions Explained*, John Benjamin's, Longman, 1987, pp.102.

## The Markers

**1. L (location), H (head), RP (reference point).** (RP is the location of H). **L (general location)** is the relation of the object and place that does not change when **RP** is the location of **H**. **RP** can be a location, volume, surface, or a line that defines the exact location of **H**. So, **L** is the concept of **general location**, see the following example;<sup>8</sup>

“Mr. Jones’ home is located **in** Cambridge”.

**Mr. John’s home** is the **H (head)**, **in** is **preposition of location** and Cambridge is the **general location**.

**2a) (H, RP) - (H is contiguous with the surface of RP).** Contiguosness establishes relationship between the surface of **H (head)** and **RP (Referential Point)**. The relation of contiguousness between the head and the referential point does not change in any way the shape of these two forms. This concept is applicable when contact or proximity is a part of two forms, and not when contact or proximity is only one point.

**2b)** The split of **H** from **RP** means detachment of **H** from **RP**. The contrast between contiguousness and detachment serves to make a distinction between prepositions, such as: "**on**", "**near**", "**on the top of**", and "**Above**". Example, if we put a pencil horizontally on a table, normally it contacts its surface, it is contiguous with the surface of the table, then we would say, "**The pencil on the table**", or "**The pencil on top of the table**". But, if we stick a thread on ceiling and then we tie tightly the pen with the end of the thread, (in case it does not touch the table’s surface) then, we would say, "**The pencil is over the table**".

Comparing the English language locative prepositions **on** and **over** with the Albanian language equivalents, the Albanian speakers use the proposition of place **mbi** for both **on** and **over**.

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<sup>8</sup> Op.cit. Quirk,pp. 118.

## ***Conclusion***

The role of semantic sign with locative prepositions is an essential element. Complex semantic sign combined with primary signs are not of less importance as well. Concept of L (location) as a relation of two objects: H (Head) and (RP) Referential Point, can be symbolized by the semantic signs L (location), H (Head), RP) (Referential Point). RP is interpreted as a place of H; it may be a subject or object, even a physical or spatial configuration. RP is a location of H. The difference between location and point of reference is that the location encompasses (but not always) a larger reference point, but reference point is always within the space of location. The combinations of relation signs and functional symbols have always different interpretations. For example, L, H and RP are on permanent connection relationships. Prepositions of place, unlike nouns and adjectives specify relation, and concepts among them with two or more arguments.

English and Albanian prepositions of place differ very much among them, since the Albanian language prepositions are more polysemious.

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